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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NICOSIA 000701

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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SE

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SUBJECT: NOT RENDERING UNTO CAESAR THAT WHICH IS CAESAR'S:
ARCHBISHOP TAKES SIDES IN PRESIDENTIAL CONTEST

REF: NICOSIA 685

Classified By: Ambassador Ronald Schlicher for Reason 1.4 (b)

11. (C) SUMMARY: Never one to shy from cameras or controversy, Archbishop Chrysostomos II's latest political interventions have brought vociferous reactions from the political opposition and sectors of the Greek Cypriot media, and left thoughtful pundits questioning the ostensible separation of church and state in Cyprus. Specifically, Chrysostomos's August promotion of President Tassos Papadopoulos's re-election bid ignited a war of words with the AKEL and DISY parties and opposition daily "Politis" that has yet to subside completely. The accusations peaked August 19, when the Primate labeled "Politis" a "Turkish newspaper," and the newspaper responded by deeming the Archbishop "an Orthodox Taliban." Although the insult-lobbing declined in the following week, due perhaps to pressure from the President's camp that his overt electoral support did more harm than good, Chrysostomos likely won't accept a muzzle anytime soon. Ethnarch he may never become, but Chrysostomos considers his role in Cyprus more than spiritual. End summary.

AN EXPERIENCED POLITICIAN, DESPITE THE COLLAR

12. (SBU) The Church and Chrysostomos are no strangers to politics, especially regarding the Cyprus Problem. In the run-up to the 2004 Annan Plan referendum, for example, priests, likely on orders from the Holy Synod, turned their sermons political nearly every Sunday in opposition to the plan. Then the Bishop of Paphos, Chrysostomos arguably took the hardest line, roundly opposing Annan and promising Church money and land to Greek Cypriot "refugees" who voted "no." ("Politis" later earned the Primate's permanent ire by publishing his personal number and urging "refugees" to telephone him directly to cash in.) The Archbishop is quite the politician himself, evidenced by his success in the 2006 ecclesiastical election. Playing Peter against Paul and against Peter again, Chrysostomos won that race despite tallying less than ten percent of the popular vote, an outcome that left clergy and laity alike questioning whether a more representative electoral system merited consideration.

POLITICAL STATEMENTS, INSULTS BRING SWIFT REACTION

13. (SBU) His recent statements and actions appear more the work of a government spokesman than church leader, however, Chrysostomos invariably championing Papadopoulos's party (DIKO) line on the Cyprus Problem and attacking those opposed

to it. On August 4, the Archbishop lambasted the current understanding of "bizonal, bicomunal federation" -- which both sides to the Cyprus dispute and the international community agree is the preferred model for a unified island -- favoring instead the fuzzier ideas offered in the late 1970s by national patriarch Makarios that "better safeguarded the survival of the Cypriot people." Three days later, Chrysostomos urged all Cypriots to align with the Cyprus Problem stance of DIKO. In two thinly-veiled attacks on AKEL and presidential candidate Dimitris Christofias, the Primate August 21 demanded the President be "armored and not undermined," and voiced his fear that "a pro-solution president means accepting the terms of the occupier."

14. (U) Press reports, mainly in "Politis," also allege Chrysostomos applied pressure to MEGA TV to re-craft its political message to align with the Church's views on the presidential elections. In a statement to MEGA Greece, which earlier leased the Church-created station and added it to its network, the Archbishop unabashedly proclaimed it "would not be right for the station created by the Church to oppose the Church's position on the national issue." He reportedly chastised MEGA over its criticism of Papadopoulos's handling of the Cyprus Problem and demanded its management hire journalists faithful to the DIKO line.

15. (SBU) The Archbishop's interventions prompted immediate reactions, most prominently from AKEL and the opposition press. The Communist party objected to the "exploitation" and "abuse" of the Church in favor of one candidate, while "Politis" attacked the Archbishop's behind-the-scenes maneuvering at MEGA TV, likening it to quashing freedom of the press. Relations between Chrysostomos and the newspaper had never been rosy, but his response to the article sunk

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their public battle to new lows. Chrysostomos hit back by calling Politis "a Greek-language Turkish newspaper; the editor-in-chief of "Politis" counterattacked by calling him "an Orthodox Taliban." The Turk-baiting stirred dismay in other political parties; DISY denounced the "climate of fanaticism and confrontation" such comments created, and even pro-Papadopoulos EDEK lamented the Archbishop's excessive response. The Cypriot Union of Journalists similarly condemned Chrysostomos's "un-Church-like and unacceptable" charges leveled at Politis.

A DEAL WITH PAPADOPOULOS?

16. (SBU) The Archbishop's barrage of statements in support of Papadopoulos's candidacy and against the conventional understanding of a bizonal, bicomunal federal solution reinforce allegations that Papadopoulos is using Chrysostomos to voice political positions the President himself cannot express due to perceived, negative electoral repercussions or the limitations of the office. Under this supposed strategy, the Archbishop helps win Papadopoulos hard-line votes from among the 76 percent of the electorate that rejected the Annan Plan, while the President appeals to moderate voters by appearing temperate compared to Chrysostomos. Partners EDEK and DIKO seem part of the game as well, having backed Chrysostomos's right to an opinion and only protesting -- but mildly -- his "Turkish newspaper" insults.

17. (SBU) Embassy contacts and political pundits consider the Archbishop's comments damaging to the president's campaign, however. DIKO represents only about one-fifth of Cypriot voters; statements solely backing the President's party therefore might aliqe over three-fourths of the electorate. Additionally, with three major candidates in the race, including DISY-backed Ioannis Kasoulides, the election almost assuredly will proceed to a second round. The vitriol of the Archbishop's activities and especially his attacks on other parties could seriously hinder Papadopoulos's chances

if the President enters a run-off, where he would need to win over a significant portion of either AKEL or DISY supporters.

ACTIVE BUT DANGEROUS ELECTORAL ROLE LIKELY

18. (C) COMMENT: We cannot dismiss those who argue that the Presidential Palace has fully blessed, if not dictated, Chrysostomos's statements and schemes -- the expressions of support from Papadopoulos's DIKO and EDEK lieutenants when the Archbishop took heat seem anything but coincidental. Yet the Primate has his own motivations to speak out on matters of state. Historically, the Church played an oversized role in Greek Cypriot society, with believers here convinced it safeguarded Cypriot Hellenism throughout centuries of foreign, "infidel" rule; Chrysostomos feels he breaks no taboos by venturing into politics. Such interventions also serve to massage his massive ego, generating press play and public buzz that no amount of theologizing could ever bring.

19. (C) At this point in the race, we agree the "blunt instrument" Chrysostomos hurts Papadopoulos more than he helps. Both DISY and AKEL leaders have revealed they feel galvanized by the Primate's remarks, which should help party cohesion come voting time. The President's own campaign is set to launch fully in September with the arrival and deployment of a professional campaign manager from Greece. We imagine that Job 1 might entail muzzling, or at least attempting to restrain, the camera-hungry Chrysostomos. No easy task, that.
SCHLICHER